

3 million bulbs distributed; now, how to get rid of them

By Lynn Thompson

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Edmonds resident Susan Dier is apologetic about the lack of drama in her long-running affair with compact fluorescent light bulbs.

She tried one several years ago, discovered that it lasted an amazing length of time, and when she moved to a new apartment in 2002, switched out almost all the traditional incandescent bulbs for the swirly, compact fluorescent ones.

"It's not very exciting," Dier said.

But her electric bill is: It's about \$12-\$15 per month.

The Snohomish County Public Utility District (PUD) has been so successful in persuading its 315,000 customers to try compact fluorescent light bulbs (CFLs) over the past eight years that the utility estimates it will distribute its 3 millionth bulb sometime this week.

Energy experts say the utilities' energy savings is equivalent to taking 150,000 cars off the road for one year.

"Three million is impressive," said Claire Fulenwider, executive director of the Northwest Energy Efficiency Alliance (NEEA) in Portland, of which the Snohomish County PUD is a member. "You guys up there are good and green."

By way of comparison, Seattle City Light, with 400,000 customers, this summer distributed its 1 millionth energy-saving bulb in a program that began last year. Puget Sound Energy, the largest of the regional utilities with 1 million customers, estimates it has distributed 8 million CFLs since 2002.

The Snohomish County program has been so successful that the utility is turning its attention to proper disposal of the bulbs, which contain trace amounts of mercury, a neurotoxin. This fall the PUD will broaden its consumer-awareness efforts and offer more convenient disposal sites for the bulbs, which must be taken to hazardous-waste-disposal sites.

The increased use of the energy-efficient bulbs is also a success for Northwest energy producers. In partnership with NEEA and the Bonneville Power Administration, about 100 utilities in Washington, Oregon, Idaho and northwest Montana have worked with manufacturers and retailers since

2001 to improve the quality and availability of the bulbs, drive down the price and increase consumer acceptance, the NEEA's Fulenwider said.

She said people were slow to warm to the new technology when it was introduced in the mid-1990s. The energy-saving bulbs were "garishly big," cost about 10 times more than a conventional light bulb, and sometimes caught lamp shades on fire.

Users also complained that the light lacked the warmth of incandescent bulbs and reminded them of the bulbs' long-tubed, institutional cousins.

The Snohomish County PUD invested about \$9 million to fund development and testing of improved CFLs. The utility also bought in bulk from manufacturers and offered the bulbs to retailers and customers for below cost, said Neil Neroutsos, PUD spokesman.

The result, he said, was improvements in the quality of light and new shapes and sizes including track lights, vanity globes and recessed lighting.

To reach customers with the new, improved CFLs, the utility partnered with county drugstores, hardware stores and even some large Asian markets frequented by immigrant families.

It mailed out coupons with monthly bills and gave away bulbs at county fairs, festivals and neighborhood events.

At the Broadway Walgreens in Everett, the CFLs, stacked just inside the front doors, are grabbed at a rate of 300 to 400 per week, said store manager Doug Hellwig. Last week, with the PUD discount, the 60-watt equivalents were selling for just 25 cents each.

Hellwig said customers recognize the value of bulbs that last about seven times longer and use significantly less electricity. But on the home front, he said, he's still trying to convince his wife.

"They can be dim when you first turn them on," he said. "The one above the closet? She doesn't want to wait."

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Times news researcher David Turim contributed to this report.